

MILK AND HONEY

Or the Parmenter Millions

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By ARTHUR W. MARCHMONT,
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Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.

Oliver Parmenter, heiress to Gregory Parmenter's millions, is engaged to marry Lord Belborough, of Oxfordshire. Her father, after receiving a mysterious cablegram from America, insists that the marriage be hastened. No objection is made, but Lady Belborough takes occasion to insult the girl and is rebuked by her husband, Lord Belborough. The wedding is interrupted dramatically by a strange woman in black, who cries: "It is the heiress, the heiress!" Mr. Parmenter falls dead from the shock, and it is later discovered that his will has been stolen, thus leaving Oliver penniless. The woman in black substantiates her claim to be the widow of Gregory Parmenter, and with her son, Gilbert Merridew, she goes to the Parmenter estate. Merridew calls on Mr. Parmenter's old lawyer, Mr. Casement, who suspects Merridew of having stolen the will. Oliver writes to her lover, saying that they must not meet again, but he secures an interview in Mr. Casement's office, in which he vainly urges her to marry him in spite of all. Finally she agrees to marry him when the mystery is cleared up, and starts on a journey of investigation. On the train she is attacked and robbed by a man disguised as a woman, but the attack prevents him from throwing her out of her compartment. The police and railroad officials discredit her story, and when about to be taken to prison Mrs. Merridew intervenes as a friend of husband and takes her to her home. Here Oliver is kept prisoner, denied the privilege of communicating with friends, and finally sent to an asylum. Her lover, Jack Belborough, arrives just in time to see her at the station and rescues her from the young physician who was taking her to the asylum. She goes to London, and there by accident learns to know Selma Hammond, an intimate acquaintance of Mr. Belborough, who proves to be a member of a noted band of crooks. Oliver plans to get into the secrets of the band, and has arranged existing conditions so that she may be a member of the band and attend a meeting, where she finds Gilbert Merridew and the man who attacked her on the train. Confronted with Merridew she tells a false story of her life, being finally recognized and boldly faced by her lover, who tells her that Merridew, alarmed, begs for mercy, but agrees to go to the asylum with her. She is made a prisoner there by the woman who turns out to be Madame Belborough, and she tries to force her to marry him. She throws a note out of her window to a clerk next door, but he seemingly declines to accept it.

CHAPTER XXX.—Continued.

"What do you mean by that?" "Mr. Merridew, it seems, cannot help himself. Those associated with him insist on carrying out the scheme against Mr. Fenwick, whatever it may be. Of course I don't know, except that it threatens him in some way. If you do not consent to do what Mr. Merridew wishes, and so enable him to take an independent line with them, your lover will be sacrificed to your selfishness."

"Mr. Fenwick would not have me save him by any such course as you would drive me to take. I shall never do it."

It was another turn of the screw. Oliver saw that clearly. But she had put Jack on his guard; the trouble at Clonkewell, indeed, had proved, too, that her warning had been effect; and she did not think he would be caught asleep after that.

Besides, if her new plan did not fail, she would soon be free again, and she would tell all she knew. And she returned her eyes to the secretary.

It was getting dusk before she saw him again. His first act was to throw up the window and look eagerly across to her. Oliver held up the letter again and pointed down into the garden. He nodded and indicated that she should throw it out.

Oliver could throw no straighter or better than women usually can, but, making a desperate effort, she hurled out the little paper weight with all her force. It went far enough, but not straight, and fell in the garden of the house next to his.

He laughed when he saw the result; but with a cheery nod, turned and left the room. A minute afterward he appeared in the garden, and scrambling by the letter and the nod, picked up the letter and ran to the window, and then climbed back into his own garden, and signed to her to send him a further message.

With pleasure at her success, Oliver turned to write another message, and found that the secretary had been in the room, and she was laying the cloth. She took no notice, and Oliver could not tell whether she had seen anything or had noticed the changed look on her face. It was impossible, however, to write a word, and she remained in the room, and, as the evening was fast growing dark, Oliver waited impatiently for her to leave.

As she was going Mrs. Taunton entered. She had come, she said, to see that Oliver had been taken care of, and she stayed a long time. She adopted a different tone from the morning, and was persuasive and urgent, speaking as if of Oliver's safety and welfare were all the world to her.

It was quite dark when she left, and to Oliver's dismay, the window opposite was unlighted. Her friend had left, and nothing more could be done that night.

She fought against her disappointment, however, and resolved to send her message the first thing in the morning. Write it that night she dared not. She could not feel sure that her room might not be searched while she slept.

But the next morning she found another unexpected difficulty. When Pantan had cleared away the breakfast and Oliver was about to write her message the woman returned and announced that she was about to clean the room. Pantan, by way of interruption and eager though she was to resume the signals with the secretary, Oliver dared not even go near the window to see if he were in his room.

Just as Pantan's work was finished Mrs. Taunton arrived. She looked depressed for going out, and said she had come to tell Oliver her decision. Her mood appeared to have changed again from that of the preceding night.

"I am tired of arguing with you, Oliver, and have made up my mind firmly what I must do. You must stay here until you consent to marry Mr. Merridew."

"You know I will not," replied Oliver firmly. "I will never do it. And you can't keep me here forever."

"Then some other means will have to be found to deal with you," said Mrs. Taunton impatiently and almost angrily.

"Is it any use to appeal to you as a woman? I am here alone. I am powerless, as I admit. I am helpless. Have you no mercy for one in such bitter trouble? You know what I have suffered at the hands of this man and his mother. They have taken away my good name; they possess the fortune which is mine by right; I am

practically destitute and in terrible sorrow. Have you no heart?" "You are ridiculous. It is because I am afraid for your life that I tell you you must take the only course of safety open to you."

"You will not let me communicate with my friends, that they may judge?" "I would, but Mr. Merridew will not."

"If I tell you I would rather die than marry this man; rather trust myself to the mercies of those with whom he is banded in this bond of crime; that my soul revolts at the mere thought of his touch, and that I should loathe myself if I could entertain even a thought of yielding—is your heart still steeled against me?"

"You are getting hysterical, that is all. Oliver threw up her hands and turned away, sighing deeply. "I am going away now for some days. Oliver. You will have the interval to grow more reasonable. If you have not changed your mind by my return some other steps will be taken. Good-by."

She cannot wish good to any one so hard as you are, and I will not pretend," and Oliver threw herself into a chair. "I hope you will never need a friend as I need one now, and never feel the wound of such conduct as yours."

Waiting a few minutes to be sure that Mrs. Taunton had gone, Oliver went to the window. Her friend was watching for her. She signalled to him, and with a beating heart wrote the message.

"I am Oliver Parmenter and in peril of my life. Please write Mr. Casement, solicitor, Oxfordshire, to come to me instantly. For God's sake."

She read it over, and with trembling fingers fastened it round the paper-weight. Her friend was already waiting in the garden, and when he saw her lifted his hand and smiled.

She pushed up the window to its farthest extent, and with a fervent prayer for the success of her venture, drew back to throw out her appeal for help.

At that moment, just as her hand was extended for the throw, some one seized it and the letter was torn from her grasp.

CHAPTER XXXI.

Folled in her attempt to attract help from the outside just at the very instant when success appeared to be in her grasp, Oliver turned with a cry of dismay to find Mrs. Taunton regarding her with a cold, cynical smile of triumph.

"You really must not bring my house into disrepute by making love to young men in the surrounding houses, Oliver. It is most disgraceful," she said, as she made haste to close the window, first glancing out in time to see the secretary's beating a hurried retreat into his house.

"You know, of course, it was nothing of the kind," retorted Oliver, furiously. "Give me back that paper at once."

Mrs. Taunton put it in her pocket instead of this. Of course, after a better Oliver, she replied with a sneer.

"Will you drive me to take it from you by force?" cried Oliver. "Pantan!" called Mrs. Taunton.

The woman entered the room instantly, having evidently been waiting just outside the door in readiness. As soon as she was inside Mrs. Taunton took out the packet and opened and read it.

"This is really worse than I thought. I would sooner have had a mere accusation than this. Of course, after this I cannot trust you to be alone in the room. Pantan, you will stay here with Miss Parmenter; and mind, she is never to be left for an instant alone."

"Yes, madam."

"And you will not allow her to go near the window after this. If she attempts, you are to take any means necessary to prevent her. Will you make arrangements to place you in another room, Oliver, where you will be spared from the impertinent attentions of the neighbors?" and with that parting shot she left the room.

She had built so much on the attempt, had indulged such hopes, and was so near success that the disappointment seemed to crush the very life out of her for the time.

There was nothing else to try. She was now hopelessly in the power of this relentless, merciless woman and the desperate man who was with her in league. It was no use to struggle farther against them. There was nothing to do but to wait and see what steps they would take next to attain their end.

Pantan had obviously come up prepared for the watch which had been assigned to her, for she had brought up some needlework. Placing a chair by the window, she sat down and commenced to sew. The most usual routine of her life.

Stitch, stitch, stitch, her work went on, the sewing only interrupted when one of the cotton was slack, and the needle had to be shaded. Her hand, grim face was bent over her work, and all her thoughts seemed to be concentrated upon her task.

She lay watching her until the cold, impassive monotony got on her nerves and she felt that she could have torn the work out of the woman's hands in a frenzy.

She turned her back to her at last, unable to bear the sight of it, only to find that the sound of it—the prick, prick of the needle and the drawing through of the thread—was as racking as the light had been. She put her fingers to her ears to stop the sound, but even that gave no relief.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, stop that sewing," she cried at length. "Pantan!" looked up in surprise. "You are excited, miss. You must try to sleep or your nerves will suffer."

"Have you no pity in your heart any more than your mistress?" "I don't know what you mean, miss."

"You know that I am being kept here a prisoner; to be forced to do that which I would rather die than do; that I am prevented from seeing my friends; that I am helpless and alone. You know all this. Will you do nothing to help me?"

"If you want anything, my orders are to get it for you."

the wall, she gave herself up to the misery that consumed her.

Pantan resumed her sewing as unconcerned as before.

In the afternoon Merridew came, and Pantan left the room.

He adopted the same line as Mrs. Taunton. Oliver was in great danger from Hartmann and the rest who had discovered the deception she had practiced; they declared that her life was forfeited by her treachery, and they had sworn to kill her. The only escape would be for her to make it possible for him to say that she was his wife. He would then be able to protect her from them.

At first Oliver would not reply, but when he began to renew his protestations of love and vow that he would give his life to her she would not bear it.

Facing him resolutely, she said in a tone of irrevocable resolve: "I have given my answer. Never so long as there is a breath in my body and I have strength left to speak will I give my other answer. If they were to cry once before to do, but make me consent to defile myself by being your wife you cannot. No power on earth, no means you can employ, no threats you can utter, will ever make me change that resolve. Now go. The mere sight of you disgusts me."

He turned to her, his brow drawn in a heavy frown, his eyes threatening and his face white and set.

"I am convinced now that persuasion is no use, Miss Parmenter. And I shall try it no more. But I shall yet prevail. And if I have to resort to force you have only yourself to blame."

The interview with him did her good. It served to restore tone to her nerves, and her courage revived. She had defied him. She knew what store he set on the marriage, and by thwarting him in that she could still foil him in what she knew was the paramount purpose of his life.

A belief took possession of her that they would not attempt to take her life, at any rate until they had made some desperate effort to force her to marry him. This suggested a fresh plan, and she gave up the idea of waiting during the weary hours of the rest of the day and evening.

Something had occurred to cause a change in their plans. He had attempted her death in that railway journey, and then had sought to have her put away as a lunatic. If they were still in the same mind as when that attempt had been made they would renew one or other of the same attempts.

Why didn't they? She thought she could detect Mrs. Taunton's subtlety could detect her change. And then an explanation occurred to her. As the result of her journey to Sheffield she had set forces to work which might result in the fraud to her father's alleged marriage being discovered. In that case they would lose everything. And it was only the marriage with her which could render them secure.

Thus gradually the conviction grew upon her that her life was safe at least until she had exhausted every means of compelling her to become his wife. She was worth more to these wretches alive than dead. There was some comfort even in such a consideration.

Moreover, as long as she could fight on, there was a possibility that some change might come to escape. She was hungry for even a crumb of hope; and in this she found it. She would steel her nerves and knit her courage.

She took to her books again, forcing her attention on what she read; and after a time committing passages of prose and verse to memory. The mental discipline benefited her greatly, restoring her balance, and giving her ease of mind and relief from the rack of her troubled thoughts.

It was to be a trial of endurance between her and Merridew, she would need to husband her strength carefully; and she was resolute enough of purpose to put all the necessary restraint upon herself.

It was well indeed for her that she had lost no time in adopting these means of recovering self-command. A searching experience was in store for her.

Pantan had passed the whole day in her interminable sewing, seemingly absorbed in it entirely; but she had observed Oliver's strenuous struggle for self-mastery; and, hard though she was, the woman had been touched by it.

"You are better, miss," she asked, as the evening meal was being laid. They were the first words which had passed for some hours, and Oliver glanced up at her with a smile.

"I am resigned, Pantan. I don't care now what happens."

"I think you are very brave, miss. I ought not to tell you, but it can do no harm. You need not fear any sort of hurt or violence."

Oliver looked at her coldly. "My experience here has taught me that when any one tells me anything it is probably false. You have, of course, been told to say that, and I do not believe you."

"You may be glad to remember it, miss, all the same."

No more was spoken. Oliver ate in silence, the light of her eyes shone, she had appetite and returned to her books. She read for a few minutes and then found that she had great difficulty in fixing her attention on the words. The Pantan looked up in surprise. "You are excited, miss. You must try to sleep or your nerves will suffer."

"Have you no pity in your heart any more than your mistress?" "I don't know what you mean, miss."

"You know that I am being kept here a prisoner; to be forced to do that which I would rather die than do; that I am prevented from seeing my friends; that I am helpless and alone. You know all this. Will you do nothing to help me?"

"If you want anything, my orders are to get it for you."

"Want anything? Can't you see that my very soul is full of suffering, and kind I shall die or go mad. Or are you also another thing of steel and iron, ready to crush me down, down, down?"

"I can only obey my orders, miss."

"Then Heaven have mercy on me!" cried Oliver, and turning her face to

distant and faint. "Remember my words. No harm will be done to you," added Pantan. It was as if she were calling from the height of some lofty mountain.

The handkerchief was pressed on her face—she had no power to resist—and after that she passed into unconsciousness.

"No harm will be done to you."

These words were humming in her ears, under the rays of the lamp as he swept the light from side to side in his systematic search. She realized that now indeed she could not hope to escape unless she could scale the gate and rush away into the darkness beyond the sweep of the ruthless light.

Spurred by this fear, she made a last desperate effort, and this time succeeded in getting to the top. But there her strength failed her, and she fell headlong into the field.

She was utterly exhausted, and calling up every ounce of her remaining strength, she managed to crawl to her feet and stumble on.

Fortune was all against her. It was a plowed field, and the ridges hampered her every step. She was alone in the lane, and now and again caught the flash of the light he carried. Just before he reached the gate she threw herself headlong on the ground behind him, covering and trembling.

The trouble to the gate, throw the light over the field, and paused. He had not seen her. Would he go on or enter the field? The suspense harrowed her. He turned and sent the light ahead of him along the lane, as if in doubt, as she crept rapidly through it.

She tried to move and found that she was enveloped in heavy rugs and shawls; and at length became aware that she was lying at full length in the tonneau of a car, traveling at high speed, and that she was alone.

She soon realized that she had been safely carried away from Mr. Taunton's house; and almost her first conscious thought was that she must try to use the time to escape.

While they were rushing along at speed, she recognized the impossibility; and she used the time of waiting to chafe her limbs, to restore the circulation of her blood, and to relieve her cramped muscles, so as to be ready should the chance come.

At a short distance had been traversed there was a heavy jerk, as if something had snapped. The car immediately began to slacken, and then came to a standstill.

The man in front rose with an oath, and Oliver recognized the voice. It was Gilbert Merridew. He turned and looked at her, bending over the seat. She lay as still as death. Satisfied with his scrutiny, he got out of the car to see what was the matter.

This was the chance she had prayed for. She was dazed by the fall; and he picked her up and half led, half carried her back to the gate, the discovery of which had proved such a cheating snare to her but a few minutes earlier.

He blocked their progress for a moment, until, laying Oliver down close to it, Merridew hunted round by the help of his lamp for a big stone, and with this he smashed the padlock and opened the gate.

She was dazed, somewhat sharply. "We have lost more than enough time already over this foolishness," and, putting his arm round her waist, he drew her up and started back to the car with as much haste as possible.

Her effort had almost exhausted her; she had no strength to resist, and when she reached the car she was almost glad to lean back restfully on the seat among the warm rugs. He put her on the front seat, as it was, so that she could see her way to the door where he was busy with the machinery. Every now and then he would straighten his back and flash the lamp in his direction, to make sure that she was not repeating her attempt to escape.

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He drove very fast, very recklessly, indeed, and had there chance to be any other vehicle on the road it seemed to Oliver that there must have been a terrible accident. She almost wished that he had not so much as touched her, and after a few minutes she began to feel the normal strength she began to yield to the fascination of the wild rush through the night.

At first she could make out nothing for the blinding glare of the brilliant headlights, which threw forward their beams like the giant feelers of some mammoth rushing beast, seeking its prey, to dash upon and destroy it.

Then, shielding her eyes from the glare of the headlights, she began to see differences in the blackness of the shadows as they fled past. First, the long line of the hedge rows; then trees; and a lonely cottage standing back, and in this way her eyes gradually grew accustomed to the dark, and she could distinguish various objects.

And all the time Merridew kept his gaze fixed rigidly on the road ahead, watching for every turn and bend, and driving with a skill that to Oliver appeared almost uncanny and devilish.

Past fields and farms and woods they dashed, always at the same rate of speed, dashing occasionally through a village or some little town, always, as it seemed to her, in danger, and always just escaping it, until at length the darkness began to lift, the glare of the headlamps grew less dazzling, and a faint rose tint showed on the skyline behind them.

For a time the darkness completely baffled her, but at length she came to a gate, and another little cry of delight and thankfulness escaped her. Here at last was the way clear to freedom.

But her hopes were cheated after all. For her infinite dismay, she found that

the gate was securely padlocked, and try as she would she could not climb it. A moan of anguish broke from her lips, and then, chancing to glance back along the lane, she saw that which filled the cup of her fear to overflowing.

Merridew was again coming in search of her, and this time he was carrying one of the powerful lamps of the car to aid the search.

Fascinated by this new terror, she was so riveted to the spot that she swept the light from side to side in his systematic search. She realized that now indeed she could not hope to escape unless she could scale the gate and rush away into the darkness beyond the sweep of the ruthless light.

Spurred by this fear, she made a last desperate effort, and this time succeeded in getting to the top. But there her strength failed her, and she fell headlong into the field.

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"No. I have not slept. Where are you taking me?" "I can't tell you that, but we shall not be long now. Another two hours, perhaps. You had better try to sleep."

"I prefer to see where I am going," she answered.

"Are you very cold?" was the next question, in a not unkindly tone, and Oliver nodded assent, and in the second, "I am very sorry for all this," he added.

"If that were true you would end it, Mr. Merridew."

"No. That is out of the question," he said sharply.

"Why? I will do anything you ask—except one thing."

"There is only one thing now for you to do, if I am to save your life. Take it. It is the money you want. Take it. I will freely make over everything to you—everything; but give me back my good name and my liberty."

"If it were possible I would do it. But it is not. In the first place, you would not be safe from the men you tricked so recklessly; and, in the second, your friends would interfere to prevent any such arrangement as you suggest."